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SIERRA FOOTHILL CONSERVANCY'S MISSION

The grasslands, foothills, and forests between Yosemite and Kings Canyon National Parks provide land for farms and ranches, a home for native plants and wildlife, and a source of clean water.

The Sierra Foothill Conservancy honors our natural and cultural heritage by protecting these resources and ensuring that present and future generations will continue to experience and enjoy the land in this region.

SFC ANNOUNCES 857 ACRES OF NEWLY PROTECTED LANDS THROUGH THE BEN HUR RANCH CONSERVATION EASEMENT!

Sierra Foothill Conservancy is elated to announce its latest acquisition - the 857-acre Ben Hur Ranch Conservation Easement! Located directly south of the SFC-held Larrick Ranch Conservation Easement, conservation of this property has now created a 5,455-acre connected conservation corridor of expansive rolling grasslands along Ben Hur Road in Mariposa County. It is a crucial piece in SFC's landscape-level strategy to forever protect the 30,000-acre Madera-Mariposa focus area, establishing an expansive tract of protected lands that span the shared county line. The Ben Hur Ranch features a bounty of conservation values, including working rangeland, annual grassland, blue oak woodland, riparian corridors, cultural and historic resources, wildlife habitat, open space, and scenic views – all of which are now forever protected. **This newest acquisition brings SFC's total acres conserved to 67,255!**

The landowner, Austin Miller, purchased the property in 2015 with the intention of expanding his cattle operation to be completely self-sustaining. Over the past decade, Austin has installed critical infrastructure onsite to increase the efficiency and sustainability of his independent operation. **To fulfill his long-term goals for the property, Austin partnered with SFC to ensure this working landscape remains intact for present and future generations.**



SFC was able to conserve the Ben Hur Ranch Conservation Easement using competitive grant funding awarded in 2022 through the Sierra Nevada Conservancy's Strategic Land Conservation Grant Program, which provides grants for the voluntary acquisition of conservation easements on natural and working lands throughout California's Sierra-Cascade region. **The program's goal is to permanently protect and manage high-benefit lands in the Sierra-Cascade that may be threatened by development or degradation.**

The Ben Hur Ranch Conservation Easement assures the property is forever conserved in its natural, scenic, agricultural, and open space condition by preventing the conversion of rangeland. **Ranching, as it did over a century ago, still plays a major economic role in Mariposa County, contributing to the region's rural character and way of life. Protecting working landscapes through conservation easements helps maintain the viability of our region's land-based economy by retaining agricultural jobs and supporting tourism, which also depends on the scenic, historic, and cultural values provided by these lands.**

Consistent with local land use planning efforts, the conservation easement limits development and land-use conversion while simultaneously supporting climate adaptation and agricultural land resilience. This area is an invaluable greenbelt of open, working landscapes between the Central Valley's development sprawl and dispersed rural residences of the foothills, helping promote compact infill development in more strategic locations of community growth, and keeping those communities safer from wildfire.

Protected landscapes in the Madera-Mariposa focus area not only provide abundant space for the survival and adaptation of wildlife, but they also safeguard natural resources, which are important for wildlife species, livestock, and human communities, alike. Although the Ben Hur Ranch Conservation Easement will not convey a public right of access and ensures the property remains in private ownership, **natural resources such as clean air and water, and wildlife habitat will be protected in perpetuity to the benefit of all.**

Special thanks to our project funder, the Sierra Nevada Conservancy and our partnering Landowner for their role in protecting this important property forever. And thank you to all of our supporters, your commitment to conservation makes this possible!

ABOUT

SFC's Vision: From the snow-capped Sierra to the Central Valley floor, expansive landscapes, important habitats, and clean water resources are conserved and managed to ensure continuing public benefits. SFC supports a thriving land-based economy while promoting a conservation ethic that spans generations. Sierra Foothill Conservancy serves eastern Fresno, Madera, Merced and Mariposa Counties in California's central Sierra Nevada. To learn more about SFC's work and how to get involved, including how to become a member or conserve your land, visit <https://sierrafoothill.org/>.

PHOTOS

All photos taken by SFC staff.
(on following page)





Top Left: The Landowner rides through Becknell Creek, which, in addition to its tributaries, flows through the property for 2.51 linear miles.

Top Right: The property features diverse, healthy habitats, including rolling annual grasslands and blue oak woodlands. Varied topography and landscape features provide cattle and wildlife high quality habitat and grazing resources.

Bottom Left: Cattle wade through an annual grassland through blue oak trees.

Bottom Right: The property boasts a bounty of natural resources, including granite slabs and wetlands.